

Sustainability Newsletter Week 52, Aug. 11-15, 2008.

Topic: Greening Your Laundry Cycle



One-year anniversary for the Sustainability Newsletters!!! Thanks to all those who read and appreciate them!!!

“Greening” the laundry cycle is more than reverting back to old-time washboards and basins. It also doesn’t mean you *have* to purchase a more efficient washer and dryer. There are many simple things you can do to save \$\$ with what you have.

1. Wear it more than once

-Obviously not *everything* should be worn more than once, but the simplest way to cut back on your laundry's impact is to just do less of it. Wearing your clothes more than once before tossing them in the dirty pile is the first step in greening your laundry habits. The United Nations Environment Programme crunched the numbers and discovered that you can consume up to five times less energy by wearing your jeans at least three times, washing them in cold water, and skipping the dryer or the iron.

2. Use “green” laundry detergent

-Conventional detergents can contain ingredients that aren't good for you, your clothes, or aquatic ecosystems where the dirty water can end up. Phosphates in conventional laundry soaps can cause algal blooms that negatively effect ecosystems and marine life. To shop for more eco-friendly detergents, look for labels that indicate a product is phosphate-free, readily biodegradable, and made from plant- and vegetable-based ingredients (instead of petroleum-based), which means they’re healthier for the earth, from production to rinse cycle. These are also usually gentler on skin. Other alternatives include soap nuts, which are made from certain tree seeds, produce a soapy substance when they come in contact with water, and can be composted after being used up. (A liquid version is available, too.) Fabric softeners can be replaced by a cup of white vinegar added to the washer during the rinse cycle. Vinegar naturally balances the pH of soap, leaving your clothes soft and free of chemical residue.

3. Choose concentrated detergent

-Concentrated laundry detergents have reduced packaging and a smaller carbon footprint (because more useful product can be shipped using less space and fuel). Plus, they are cheaper per ounce. Some mainstream retailers such as Wal-Mart now sell only concentrated laundry detergents.

4. Make your own laundry detergent

-Do-it-yourself laundry soap is possibly the most eco-friendly way to go. You'll only need just a handful of ingredients that can all be found at most grocery stores. Best of all, you'll know exactly what's going in (and what you're keeping out) of your formula, and, after some practice, you can customize your mix with essential oils for a fresh fragrance. Check out some recipes for liquid and powder detergents at <http://planetgreen.discovery.com/home-garden/make-your-own-laundry-soap.html> .

5. Maximize your washer for energy efficiency

-If you have a top-loading washing machine from the 1990s or before, chances are it uses almost twice as much water per load than a newer machine. Front-loading washing machines (also sometimes called "horizontal axis" machines) bearing the Energy Star logo typically use between 18 and 25 gallons per load, compared to 40 gallons for older machines. Whether or not you're ready to replace your current hardware, there are things you can do to upgrade efficiency.

-First, wash in cold water. A monstrous 90 percent of energy used for washing clothes goes to heating the water, costing you \$100 or more every year. With more and more detergents specialized for cold-water washing, your whites will still get white without the hot (or warm) water. Next, be sure to wash only full loads of laundry, which ensures that your machine is operating at peak efficiency. If you can't quite fill it up, the "load size selector option" (if you have one) ensures that smaller loads use less water. The same rule applies to the dryer also.

6. Hang it out to dry

-Because dryers use so much energy, skipping the process altogether can make a real difference. While some homeowners' associations and municipalities oppose hanging clothes out to dry, the pro-line drying movement, headed up by Right to Dry, is putting up a good defense for your right to harvest free solar energy. For apartment renters, a drying rack is useful, or you can just hang pants over chairs and shirts on hangers wherever possible (my apartment looks so classy on laundry day!). An added bonus is that clothes last longer when you line dry because there's less wear and tear than using the dryer.

7. Maximize your dryer

-Line-drying doesn't have to be an all or nothing choice. If you're sticking with the dryer for part (or all) of the time, cleaning the lint filter frequently will increase efficiency and shorten drying time. If your dryer has a moisture sensor, use it. This will automatically reduce the amount of drying time or shut off the machine when it senses that clothes are dry, which reduces wear and tear on your threads and saves lots of energy. Though Energy Star doesn't rate dryers, a good moisture sensor is the best thing to look for if you're shopping for a new dryer.

-It also might be a good idea to ditch dryer sheets, which can be full of cancer-causing chemicals and neurotoxins such as toluene and styrene. They also break down organic fibers, shortening the life of your fabrics. Instead, toss a packet of dried organic lavender in the dryer for a healthy, sweet scent.

8. Don't iron if you don't have to

-Not only is ironing a tedious chore, it also consumes energy and can deteriorate fabric. Instead of ironing, simply hang clothes up immediately after the wash cycle is complete. The water still in them will work with gravity to pull most wrinkles out. For wrinkle-prone clothing such as linen, cut the final spin cycle, which will leave even more water in the garments, creating yet more pull. Then fold dry clothes where you want creases to be, and place them under other clothes in your dresser, which will further help to press them.

9. Head to the Laundromat

-Commercial washers and dryers tend to be more efficient than domestic versions, so taking your bundle to the neighborhood Laundromat may use less energy. If you drop your laundry off (or have it picked up) for service, ask the cleaner to use green detergents.

10. Don't bother with dry cleaning

-Conventional dry cleaning is a particularly un-green process; most businesses use the chemical perchloroethylene (also called "perc"), which research studies have shown may be dangerous to our health. Exposure to this chemical has been linked to increased risks of bladder, esophageal, and cervical cancer; eye, nose, throat and skin irritation; and reduced fertility; among other effects.

-Luckily, there are alternatives. For starters, if you want to eliminate dry cleaning from your life, start by buying clothes that don't require it--it's wise to read care labels before making purchases. Also, recognize that many

delicates and other garments, including those made from cashmere and lambs' wool, can be safely and easily hand washed.

-For those items that must be professionally treated, don't sweat it. Reducing your exposure--not eliminating it--is a fine goal. Plus, greener dry cleaners are also on the horizon. Some businesses now use liquid carbon dioxide instead of perc and you can use the EPA's list of CO2 cleaners to find one near you (www.epa.gov/dfe/pubs/garment/gcrg/cleanguide.pdf; so far most are near Milwaukee and the Twin Cities). Wet cleaning is another professional alternative that uses water, along with computer-controlled washers and dryers, specialized detergents that are milder than home laundry products, and professional pressing and finishing equipment.

(Source: <http://planetgreen.discovery.com/green-guides/green-laundry/green-laundry-basics.html>).

Interesting fact:

The average household racks up almost 400 loads of laundry each year, which consumes about 13,500 gallons of water, according to Energy Star. Switching to an Energy Star-qualified front-loading (or "horizontal axis") machine can save as much as 7,000 gallons of water per year. Over the approximately 11-year life of a washer, that's enough water to fill up three backyard swimming pools or provide a lifetime of drinking water for six people! An Energy Star-qualified clothes washer can also save you \$550 in operating costs over its lifetime, compared to one that doesn't bear the label.

